

THE
CHARACTER
OF
ABRAHAM
LINCOLN

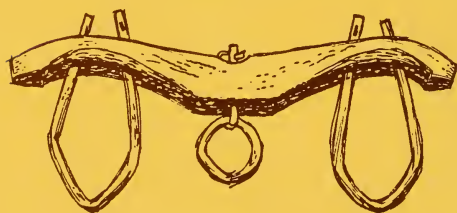
By
WILLIAM E. McCULLOCH

With a Foreword by
HAROLD L. WATT

LINCOLN FELLOWSHIP
OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
NINETEEN HUNDRED FORTY-SIX

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FOREWORD

THE POSSIBILITY *that the survival of civilization itself may come to depend upon the capacity of people to adjust their differences and accommodate their modes of life gives new importance to the study of the character, achievements and political philosophy of Abraham Lincoln.*

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Believing *that there was never greater need than at the present time for the example and inspiration of the courage, steadfastness and resourcefulness with which Lincoln faced the period of national crisis of his time, the Lincoln Fellowship of Southern California has arranged for the publication of the essay by Dr. William E. McCulloch, titled THE CHARACTER OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, as broadcast by the author, over Radio Station KFAC, on February 12, 1946. Although here given in its final abbreviated form, this literary gem was originally presented as a popular lecture, before such groups as the Fellowship itself and the Lions' Club of Los Angeles, by whom it was received with sincere appreciation.*

The author, *after many years of pastoral work, is now Superintendent of Missions of the Synod of California, United Presbyterian Church of North America. A graduate of Monmouth College, born near the Lincoln country, —his father, Joseph McCulloch, a captain of Company C, 77th Illinois Volunteers,—Dr. McCulloch's background and scholarship have made him an able interpreter of Lincoln. He is a member of the speaker's bureau of the Fellowship and has written and lectured extensively on the life and character of the Great Emancipator.*

HAROLD L. WATT
First Vice-President,
Lincoln Fellowship
of Southern California

Los Angeles, California
November 25, 1946

The Character of Lincoln



ANY will agree with the sentiment, expressed by James Russell Lowell, that Abraham Lincoln is "the first American." In our estimation of a man we must consider the depth from which he rises as well as the height to which he attains. From log hut to the White House, from rail-splitter to the emancipator of a race, from country-store politics to broadest statesmanship, from lowly obscurity to undying fame—that is the story of Lincoln. He was pre-eminently the man of the people. He sprang from their midst. For them he toiled and suffered. For them he wrought his tremendous task. For them he gave his life. The people will not forget but will ever hold him in grateful memory.

The main events in Lincoln's life are these: Born in a Kentucky log-cabin, February 12, 1809; at seven years of age moved with the family to Indiana; at twenty-one years of age moved to Illinois and settled in the little village of New Salem where successively he was clerk in a grocery store, surveyor, postmaster, captain in the Black Hawk War; entered the practice of law in Springfield; served eight years in the Illinois State Legislature and one term in Congress; contested with Stephen A. Douglas for his seat in the United States Senate, at which time occurred the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, seven in number, the greatest forensic battle this country has ever known; defeated for the Senate, but nominated and elected

President in 1860; re-elected in 1864 and, on April 14th of the following year, slain by an assassin.

WE NOTE first, Lincoln's wonderful capacity for growth, especially from the time of his entrance into the Presidency. London "Punch" lampooned and caricatured him unmercifully during his administration. It did not realize his greatness until the hour of the tragedy, when it made a noble apology with a poem entitled "The Atonement of Mr. Punch." Here is one stanza:

*My shallow judgment I had learned to rue;
Noting how to occasion's height he rose;
How his quaint wit made home truth seem more true;
How iron-like his temper grew by blows.*

The problem of saving this country grew to one of gigantic proportions, and Lincoln grew with the problem. He made some mistakes, it is true, but never a vital error. The words of Emerson, spoken a few days after the President's death, are the verdict of the American people today: "His mind mastered the problem of the hour; and as the problem grew, so did his comprehension of it."

THIS MAN was merciful to a fault. There were stern men during war days who declared that he was destroying the discipline of the army by a too lavish use of the pardoning power. It is said that he could never sign a death warrant without a trembling hand and an aching heart, and that, if he could find a single excuse, the offender would go free. The following is a case in point: In the heat of battle a soldier became panic-stricken, threw away his gun, took to his heels and hid behind a stump. His bad example caused considerable demoralization in his regiment. This man was court-martialed and condemned to death for cowardice in face of the enemy. Appeal was made to Lincoln who pardoned him, and whose excuse was

this: "If the Lord has given a man a cowardly pair of legs, how can he help it when they run away with him?" In reply to General Butler's demand, "Shoot every deserter!" Lincoln replied, "God help me! How can I have butchers' days in the army!"

Was his clemency too broad, his heart too tender? Did he defeat the ends of justice? The answer is an emphatic "No!" At a time when brothers were clutching at the throats of brothers, when fraternal blood was being poured forth in torrents, when serpent-crowned furies were loose in the land, God be thanked for a President with the heart of an Abraham Lincoln!

Now for a glance at the humorous side of this strangely complex character. Here was a man who certainly appreciated the ludicrous and the droll. His law partner, William H. Herndon, says that, in the role of a story-teller, he was unequalled. Early in life the humorous tendency was manifest. On the fly-leaf of an old school book are these words:

*Abraham Lincoln, his hand and pen;
He will be good, but God knows when.*

In his correspondence there is much that is mirth-provoking. While he was practicing law in Springfield a firm in New York City wrote him, inquiring into the financial standing of a certain man in the community. He replied as follows: "Gentlemen: I am well acquainted with Mr.—, and know his circumstances. First of all, he has a wife and baby. Together they ought to be worth \$50,000.00 to any man. Second, he has an office in which there is a table worth \$1.50, and three chairs worth, say, \$1.00. Last of all, there is in one corner a large rat-hole which will bear looking into. Respectfully, A. Lincoln."

CONCERNING the matter of Lincoln's religion, a great variety of opinions has been expressed. Some have denounced him as an atheist; others have canonized him as a saint. The truth seems to be that, in his early years, he was a sceptic; but in later years, particularly during the terrible ordeal of war, he developed into a profound believer in God and a man of earnest prayer. In 1851, when his father lay dying, Lincoln wrote to his step-brother: "Tell father to call upon and confide in our great and good and merciful Maker. He notes the fall of a sparrow and numbers the very hairs of our heads. He will not forget the dying man who puts his trust in Him."

When he became President he always kept the Bible on his desk, the Book with which he was thoroughly familiar. In 1864 a Committee from the General Conference of the Methodist Church called upon him. In reply, he said: "God bless the Methodist Church; and blessed be God who in this hour giveth us the churches." To a committee from the Presbyterian Church, Lincoln said: "From the beginning I saw that the issues of our great struggle depended on the Divine interposition and favor." Again and again in public utterance he called upon the Christian people of the land for their prayers.

A well-known clergyman called on him and said, "I trust that the Lord is on our side in this great struggle." Lincoln replied: "I am more concerned to know that we are on the Lord's side." He said to General Dan Sickles and to General James F. Rusling that, before the battle of Gettysburg, he "had prayed mightily to God." In his Second Inaugural Address, which the London *Times* pronounced "the greatest state paper of the century," and which the London *Saturday Review* declared was "the sublimest political document in all history," Mr. Lincoln offers two Scriptural quotations; the first from Christ's

words, in Matthew 18:7, the second from Psalm 19:9. As regards Mr. Lincoln's religion, it is fair to let him speak for himself. His own words, some of which I have quoted, are accurate revelations of his beliefs.

IN the mysterious providence of God, Mr. Lincoln was sufferer. Over his whole life there hovered the shadow of tragedy. At nine years of age, his childish sobs broke the silence of the forest at his mother's grave. He was afflicted with a constitutional melancholy which at times produced seasons of profound and terrible depression during which his friends kept watch over him and when he would not trust himself with a knife—not even a pen-knife—in his possession.

Frank Carpenter, well-known artist, who spent six months in the White House, and who painted the famous picture, "Lincoln and His Cabinet," said that the face of Lincoln, in repose, was the saddest human face he ever saw. As President it was his fate from the first to be misunderstood. His motives were misinterpreted, his acts condemned. He was mercilessly ridiculed. Curses loud and deep were hurled at his head. Then, too, in a unique manner, he was the bearer of his people's burdens. Every sickening report that came from the battlefield, every wail that rose from a desolate home, tore his tender heart. I would call him The Man of Sorrows, did not that title belong to Him who bore the Cross of Calvary.

AND NOW for the end of this "strange, eventful history." Time rolled around to the fatal 14th of April, 1865. The bloody war was practically ended. Lee's army had surrendered at Appomatox, and magnanimous Grant had dictated the terms. The President's mind and heart were full of plans for reconstruction. In his hand was the olive-branch of mercy, held out to the stricken South. The coun-

try looked to him as the physician who would now bind up its awful wounds. But his work was done. There remained for him the altar of sacrifice and the crown of martyrdom. On April 14th Abraham Lincoln made his last and best gift to the American people, his blood, his life.

The last scene of this sombre drama: Generals, Senators, members of the Cabinet, heads of the Government are gathered 'round the bedside of their dying Chief. Through the melancholy night they watch and wait. At 22 minutes past 7:00, the morning of the following day, the end came. John Hay, one of his private secretaries, says, of that moment of transition, that "a look of infinite peace spread itself over the rough, haggard face." Abraham Lincoln had entered into his well-earned rest.

A few days later the stern Secretary Stanton looked upon the face of the dead Chieftain and said: "There lies the greatest ruler of men that ever lived." I would not be so presumptuous as to affirm or deny that statement. Let it stand for what it is worth, the conviction of a strong man, and one not given to sentimental gush.

AT ALL EVENTS, the fame of Lincoln is secure. It will grow with the years. He came, like the noble Roman of old, from the farm, to save his country in its hour of supreme need. He came with the smell of the forest upon his garments, the fragrance of the prairie in his soul, to lead the counsels of state in the fiercest struggle of the nineteenth century.

With only nine months of common school training, but in his youth having absorbed the two greatest English classics, the King James Version of the Bible, and Shakespeare, together with Pilgrim's Progress, Aesop's Fables, Robert Burns and Blackstone, this man wrote two universally acknowledged classics, the Gettysburg Address and

the Second Inaugural, and uttered messages of truth that moved the world.

Entrusted in those dark days of Civil War with the power of a despot, he guarded with exquisite care the institutions of the Republic and ruled with the love of a saint. Breathing the atmosphere of battle, standing amid the din of strife, he had "malice toward none and charity for all." Incorruptible, strong in spirit, steadfast of purpose, holding firmly to the hand of God, he battled heroically on until chains fell, dungeons were opened, and Right took the throne.

In the greatest of all Lincoln poems, Edwin Markham expresses beautifully the nation's reverent thought and profound gratitude:

*So came the Captain with the mighty heart;
And when the judgment thunders split the house,
Wrenching the rafters from their ancient rest,
He held the ridgepole up, and spiked again
The rafters of the Home. He held his place—
Held the long purpose like a growing tree—
Held on through blame and faltered not at praise.
And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down
As when a lordly cedar, green with boughs,
Goes down with a great shout upon the hills,
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.*

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